



## NEWS ROUNDUP

12 August 2022 [as of 08:22 am]

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By Rachel Ramirez

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## **THE KOREA TIMES**

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By: Lee Hyo-jin

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### **Makati to install solar panels in city public schools, gov't offices**

**By: Beatrice Pinlac**

MANILA, Philippines – Public schools and local government offices in Makati City will soon be powered by solar panels, said Mayor Abby Binay.

## **THE PHILIPPINE STAR**

### **Hunger games**

**By Boo Chanco**

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**Information and Knowledge Management Division**



## BBC NEWS

### Panama Canal grapples with climate change threat

Global warming and changing weather patterns are affecting the water supply for one of the world's most important waterways, the Panama Canal, as well as access to drinking water for millions of Panamanians, reports journalist Grace Livingstone from Panama City.

The Panama Canal is a great feat of 20th-Century engineering.

Upon its completion in 1914, this man-made waterway linking the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans nearly halved the travel time between the US West Coast and Europe.

To this day, ships have to pass through a series of locks to overcome the differences in height along its 50-mile (80km) length. They are lifted up to 85ft (26m) above sea level before being lowered again.

The canal's locks act as a kind of elevator, using enormous amounts of water released from artificial lakes at the top of mountains to raise the vessels, explains Mahelis de García, a Panama Canal guide.

But as global warming affects weather patterns, operating the canal is becoming an ever greater challenge. According to the Panama canal authorities, 2019 was the fifth driest year in Panama for 70 years with rainfall down 20% compared to the historic average.

But it is not only dry years that cause difficulties - heavy rain can also create problems as it can cause the artificial lakes to overflow.

As dry years and storms become more common, the canal needs to find fresh sources of water and new ways to store it.

Every time a ship goes through the locks, 55m gallons (250m litres) of fresh water is used, then released into the sea. On average, 37 ships go through the locks every day, using more than 2bn gallons (9bn litres) of fresh water.

The vice-president of water projects at the Panama Canal, John Langman, says they are working on finding solutions to ensure the canal does not run out of water. "We understand that the canal is of huge significance to the Panamanian economy."

He explains that in the exceptionally dry year of 2019, the canal authorities had to reduce the amount of water they used to operate the locks, which meant that ships could not carry such heavy cargo because there was less water between the keel of the ship and the bottom of the canal.

To keep the locks functioning, the canal authorities are looking at ways to store more water in rainy years to ensure a sufficient supply in drier times.

They are carrying out feasibility studies on a number of options including deepening existing artificial lakes to capture more rainwater.

Mr Langman says they will aim first to find a solution within the watershed around the canal, but they may have to look at water sources in other parts of the country.

None of the options are easy.

One possibility that canal authorities are studying is building a dam on the river Indio, in the province of Coclé in central Panama.

But this could displace thousands of small farmers, and it has worried Diego Herrera, who farms 40 hectares of land with his family in Coquillo. "What will we do if they flood our land? Where will we go? They haven't explained to us where they will relocate us."

It is important to emphasize that this dam is only one of many possible options under consideration, and the canal authorities stress that they will opt for a solution that has the lowest environmental and social impact.

The search for water sources is not just about ships and commerce.

The Panama Canal Authority also supplies drinking water to half of the Panamanian population, including the residents of the capital, Panama City.

The drinking water comes from the same artificial lakes that is used to run the locks.

The Panama Canal Authority is considering desalinating sea water for human consumption, enabling more of the water in the artificial lakes to be used for the canal.

Environmentalist and former deputy mayor of Panama City, Raisa Banfield, says that as the population of the city grows, with more buildings constructed and forest areas depleted, there is increasing pressure on Panama's water resources. Climate change is making the search for solutions urgent.

The Panama Canal has extremely good meteorological data because it has been monitoring rainfall since 1880.

Steven Paton, a scientist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama, says this 142 years of data shows changes in rainfall that are consistent with climate change.

He says that in the past 25 years, "we've had eight of the 10 greatest storms, the two driest years and the driest three years in a row, in which the average rainfall was lower than in any other three-year period. We've set all kinds of records."

He adds that weather patterns are becoming less predictable: for example 2022 has seen the earliest start to the rainy season in Panama since records began.

"There's no analogue to what's happened this year," he says.

The original steel-plated gates made over 100 years ago are still opening the locks to ships from around the world, but as rainfall patterns change it is becoming more and more difficult to source the water to operate the canal.

## CNN PHILIPPINES

### The Arctic is warming four times faster than the rest of the planet, new research shows

By Rachel Ramirez

As sea ice vanishes, Greenland melts and wildfires scorch the planet's northernmost forests, new research confirms what scientists are sounding alarms about: the Arctic has warmed much faster than the rest of the world in the past several decades.

The phenomenon, called Arctic amplification, is caused by the heat-trapping emissions from burning fossil fuels. The pace of the temperature increase around the North Pole in recent decades was four times higher than the rest of the planet, researchers at the Finnish Meteorological Institute found in a study published Thursday.

Another problem: Climate models, which scientists used to predict long-term change, are not capturing this high rate of warming, lead author and researcher Mika Rantanen told CNN, which was part of this study's motivation. That's concerning because if the models can't recreate what's happening right now, scientists can't be confident in their long-term predictions.

"Because of this discrepancy, we decided that this needs to be corrected," Rantanen said. "This needs to be updated."

The study, published in the journal *Nature Communications Earth and Environment*, analyzed temperature trends in the Arctic Circle between 1979 and 2021 — the modern era of satellite data. They found the rate of warming is particularly high in the Eurasian region of the Arctic, especially the Barents Sea, which has warmed seven times faster than the global average.

Recent data revealed that the annual average temperature in the Barents region climbed by as much as 2.7 degrees Celsius (4.9 degrees Fahrenheit) each decade in the past 20 to 40 years, making the Barents Sea and its islands the fastest warming location on the planet.

Climate change has triggered a rapid loss in sea ice in the Arctic region, which in turn has amplified global warming. Bright white sea ice reflects solar energy back to space, but when it melts, the dark ocean absorbs that heat.

John Walsh, chief scientist at the International Arctic Research Center in the University of Alaska Fairbanks, said the study's timeframe really homed in on the Arctic amplification phenomenon, which has been more significant in the past several decades than the early and mid-1900s.

"The Arctic amplification is unmistakable," Walsh, who is not involved with the study, told CNN. "It's more than a factor of one; it's a factor of several — whether it's two or three or

four — and I think that doesn't change the fact that the Arctic is warming faster than the rest of the world."

Last year's annual Arctic Report Card, which was published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, found that the Arctic region is warming faster than the rest of the Earth and is rapidly losing ice cover, transforming the typically frozen landscape to a greener and browner one than it was just roughly a decade ago.

All these findings also reflect the most recent UN state-of-the-science report on the climate crisis, which found the Arctic will continue to warm faster than the rest of the planet as long as humans continue to burn fossil fuels and release greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

"The Arctic is really more sensitive to global warming than previously thought," Rantanen said. "Only time will tell. Let's see how this will evolve in the future."

## **MANILA BULLETIN**

### **CHR welcomes UN's resolution on clean, healthy, sustainable environment as universal human right**

By: Czarina Nicole Ong Ki

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) welcomed the resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) which recognized a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a universal human right.

CHR Executive Director Jacqueline Ann de Guia said that the international recognition of UNGA's resolution adopted last July 28 can spur global and domestic legal advances that positively affect the environment and overall human well-being.

De Guia cited Costa Rica, Fiji, Mexico, Slovenia, Colombia, and France as examples of countries that benefitted from the 2010 UNGA resolution that upheld one's right to water and sanitation. She said the new UNGA resolution emphasized that the right to a healthy environment is a "claim right."

She explained that "claim rights" require other parties to shoulder responsibilities aside from the right holder, unlike liberty rights wherein duty bearers are required only to recognize and uphold the fundamental freedom.

"A proactive and unified effort can therefore be demanded from States, world leaders, business corporations, and international organizations to address the urgency of the climate crisis," she stressed. De Guia also pointed out that the call made by UN Member States also echoed the report made by the CHR on the world's first National Inquiry on Climate Change (NICC), which stated that climate change is anthropogenic and a human rights issue.

"In the report, we cited the 20-year data period of the Global Climate Risk Index which ranks the Philippines as the fifth most climate change-affected nation," she said.

"This is despite the fact that the country only accounts for 0.3 percent of global emissions, while the fossil fuel industry contributed majorly to the observed rise in global average temperature. Most evidently, the impacts of climate change disproportionately affect the Filipino people," she added. With the recent UN resolution, the CHR is hopeful for the restoration of the world's ecosystems that would ensure human security and development, and look forward to "global solidarity" in ending environmental injustices and climate-induced disasters. "We implore the government to make inclusive and equitable the implementation of legal frameworks to prevent environmental harm. This may be done by making accountable entities that severely contribute to global carbon emissions. Further, public participation of the most affected populations must be undertaken in the development of green policies," De Guia added.

In the Philippines, the right to a healthful and balanced ecology is a justiciable issue under the Writ of Kalikasan which was adopted by the Supreme Court (SC) in 2010.

The SC has many pending Writ of Kalikasan petitions and has resolved numerous cases.

## **ELEVENTH HOUR: One generation in a vanishing world**

By Climate Reality Project Philippines

Do I make a difference? Does what I do even matter in the kind of world we live in today? Reading the news nowadays can feel like an endless scroll of grief—of health emergencies, calamities, impunity-fueled violence, corruption, and all-around chaos. All the while, the Earth hurtles toward its thresholds.

This year, we marked the earliest ever Earth Overshoot Day, the day when humanity's demand for resources exceeds what the Earth can regenerate in that year. The clock is counting down for us, but instead of racing toward a better reality, humanity is racing toward its early grave.

Has it not always been this way, though? Every decade feels like the worst, yet here we still stand. Humans are survivors and when the hour seems most dire, we somehow find a way to pull through.

We are now in that dire hour. We are set to surpass 1.5°C of warming—the turning point for many of the natural systems that sustain us—in the next two decades. When there is overwhelming noise from the many crises at home, it is easy to ignore the sound of the gas leaking until we suddenly find ourselves choking on the fire's smoke.

What if we listened? What if we cut through the noise, cared more, and came together to save our one home? We have not come this far only to get this far. There must be a redemption arc waiting for us but how do we achieve it? How do we secure a livable world for all?

To change everything, we need everyone. We need intergenerational solidarity.

People across all age groups have been and are still doing the best they can to address the climate crisis. Some have been in the fight since the climate and environmental movement started decades ago—climate veterans who shaped the movement into what it is today.

We have diplomats who participated in climate negotiations and intergovernmental discussions, such as Christiana Figueres, the former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) who helped broker the Paris Agreement in 2015. Here in the Philippines, we have Atty. Antonio Oposa who fought for the rights of children to a healthy environment.

Of course, climate change is not only fought through legal and judicial matters. Through providing zero-waste products that are accessible and affordable, our everyday heroes such as Kate Galido of Back to Basics Ecostore and Aimee Oliveros of RE-Store MNL exemplify that everything we do in our day-to-day counts.

Equipped with energy, passion, creativity, and endless hope, today's generation of youth has continued and multiplied these actions. Despite being the least responsible for this crisis, young people have recognized their duty to ensure the future they will pass on to the next generations is better than the one they are currently living through.

We have witnessed young people in climate action. Climate activists from Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines (YACAP) and Youth Strike for Climate Philippines, among other groups, have been demanding genuine solutions from people in power and climate justice for the most affected. Youth-led organizations like Kids for Kids and For the Future have also been at the frontlines of supporting vulnerable communities.

There are no small roles. Each generation acting in its full potential is key to securing a livable world. Older generations hold the wisdom of experience while the youth hold the wisdom of conviction. We must act in unison because a fossil fuel-free, low-emissions, and resilient world is something we can only achieve together. We must stop perpetuating outdated prejudices and stereotypes.

We must recognize instead that when we break the barriers that divide us and come together for a world and a future we can be proud of, we will become unstoppable, and so is the change we want to happen. There are no boomers, millennials, or Gen Z's in a vanishing Earth. To save ourselves in the world we know and love today, we must be one: the generation that acted on climate—the generation that fought and won.

We must be clear: our time is running out and we cannot afford to keep climate change at the end of our long list of crises. We need fast-tracked and scaled-up action to prevent the worst of the climate impacts billions are already suffering from today. We're in the endgame now, but we know, shoulder to shoulder, we can do this all day. We can keep fighting together until we finally achieve a better reality for all.

## QC gov't launches climate crisis action plan

By: Aaron Homer Dioquino

The Quezon City government, in collaboration with the C40 Cities, has launched a new environmental initiative that will address the climate crisis in the city.

Mayor Joy Belmonte led the Climate Action Implementation (CAI) program launching ceremony at the Novotel Manila in Araneta City, QC on Thursday, Aug. 11, along with Vice-Mayor Gian Sotto, British Ambassador to the Philippines Laure Beaufils, C40 Regional Director for East, Southeast Asia, and Oceania Milag San Jose-Ballesteros, city officials, and other guests.

The C40 Cities is a network of mayors of nearly 100 leading world cities collaborating to deliver the urgent action needed to confront the climate crisis, according to [www.c40.org](http://www.c40.org).

Through the CAI, which is part of the Urban Climate Action Plan programme funded by the United Kingdom government, the C40 will work with 15 cities from different countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, to deliver at least two priority high impact actions from their climate action plans and embed them into city governance, planning and decision making structures, supporting continued monitoring and progress of climate actions. Quezon City is the only city in the Philippines which is part of the group since 2015.

"The UK recognises that climate action at the sub-national level is a key element of the global net zero equation. With rapid urbanization, cities like Quezon City, will have more crucial role in the climate transition to curb emissions, ensure a green recovery and low-carbon growth, while safeguarding citizens against the severe impact of climate change," Beaufils said. According to the city government, the program will implement transformational climate change actions and mainstreaming activities based on the city's enhanced Local Climate Change Action Plan (LCCAP).

It will focus on policies and actions to enhance energy efficiency, amend the "green building code," and expand the adoption of renewable energy in the government-owned, commercial, and residential buildings, the local government said. It will also help Quezon City become "carbon-neutral" by 2050 and secure a greener future for its residents.

## THE KOREA TIMES

### Korea urged to take preemptive steps to deal with climate change-induced disasters

By: Lee Hyo-jin

After Seoul and its surrounding areas were battered by record-breaking downpours over the last two days, experts are calling for preemptive mitigation and prevention efforts, warning that the country may witness more extreme weather events caused by climate change.

Nine people were killed in the torrential rainfall as of Wednesday — five in Seoul, three in surrounding Gyeonggi Province and one in Gangwon Province, while seven people went missing, according to the Central Disaster Safety and Countermeasures Headquarters. The authorities said 2,600 homes and residential buildings were destroyed, leaving at least 600 people displaced.

The accumulated rainfall across Seoul stood at 525 millimeters as of 11 a.m., while some parts of Gyeonggi Province were drenched with 532.5 millimeters of rain.

Presiding over a flood response meeting, President Yoon Suk-yeol offered an apology to the public for the inconveniences caused by the heavy rainfall, while ordering relevant ministries to take immediate measures for a swift recovery.

"We can no longer call such extreme weather abnormal. We may see record-breaking levels again at any time," he said, stressing that the country must map out new measures to cope with worse-than-expected scenarios.

#### Unusual rainfall

"Dongjak District saw the highest amount of rainfall since the country began tracking precipitation levels in 1907," an official at the Korea Meteorological Administration (KMA) told The Korea Times. "But we have not included the figure in the official record since the data came from Dongjak District and not from the official weather observation center in Jongno District."

The state weather agency viewed that the latest rainfall was somewhat unusual, considering that Korea's annual rainy season occurs from late June through the end of July.

"The heavy downpour was brought by a rain band caused by a collision between dry, cold air from the north and a warm, humid air band from the south forming in the central region of Korea," the official explained.

But he was cautious to link the extreme precipitation to climate change caused by global warming, saying that more data should be gathered to find a direct correlation between the two.

"However, they are not completely irrelevant. The amount of water vapor in the atmosphere is increasing due to global warming, leading to a rise in ocean surface temperatures. And this could have some effect on the formation of precipitation in the summer monsoon season as well as on the formation of stationary fronts," he said.

### Seoul city urged to improve drainage system

The unprecedented flooding was way over the volume the drainage system in Seoul could handle, according to disaster management experts, who urged that the city government should scale up its infrastructure to cope with similar disasters in the future.

"Disasters often occur without any warning signs, the very reason why we must be fully prepared in advance," said Kong Ha-sung, a professor of fire and disaster prevention at Woosuk University. "In order to save more lives and mitigate the impact of disasters, investing in prevention is much more important than relief efforts."

Kong added that authorities should improve the drainage system especially in Seoul's Gangnam district, which is geographically vulnerable to floods.

"The neighborhood near Gangnam subway station is about 10 meters lower in altitude than surrounding areas, causing the area to flood very quickly. And the drainage system in the district can handle only up to 90 to 95 millimeters of rain per hour," he said.

Cho Won-cheol, an emeritus professor of civil engineering at Yonsei University, believed that the capital region is not equipped with sustainable drainage infrastructure despite rapid urbanization.

"Many roads in Seoul do not have proper drainage systems to efficiently collect and remove water runoff in the event of heavy rain or floods. It is regretful that the importance of ensuring sufficient investment in such infrastructure is often overlooked by the authorities," Cho said.

"The establishment of proper drainage systems is a long-term project which would take from five to 10 years, requiring consistent governance. But the city authorities often choose to scrap or abandon the policies of their predecessors, a major reason why the capital has yet to see any meaningful results," he added.

## THE MANILA TIMES

### Overseas Pinoy Scientist in China: A Disaster Risk Reduction 'Evangelist'

Dr. Glenn F. Fernandez, a 2021 Pamana ng Pilipino Presidential awardee, had personal reasons to specialize in the field of disaster mitigation and management.

His coastal hometown in Pagadian, Zamboanga del Sur was the hardest hit by the 1976 Moro Gulf tsunami. It was the worst disaster in Philippine history with the most number of casualties before super typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) wrought havoc in 2013 on practically the whole Visayas.

Glenn resolved to learn only from the best and Japan is known among the world leaders in disaster studies. With a scholarship from the Japan Ministry of Education (Monbukagakusho), he completed his post-graduate degree in Environmental Management (specializing in Disaster Risk Management) at the Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies at Kyoto University, which is consistently ranked among the world's best universities.

In keeping with his objective to learn ways to help the Philippines, a country constantly visited by natural calamities like typhoons, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes, Glenn has undertaken several studies that would help the government and the citizenry have a better understanding of disasters and prepare for them effectively and efficiently. He also undertook other related research that would benefit Asian countries and the whole region.

His research included "Business Continuity Management into the Curricula of Business Schools in the Philippines", "Reviewing Five Decades of Japan's Science Diplomacy in Southeast Asia", "Developing Capacity for Post-Typhoon Disaster Waste Management in Coastal Cities in Fiji and the Philippines", "Monitoring and Rehabilitation of Mangroves (Tsunami Bio-Shield) by Youth Councils", "Is Tsunami Tendenko (Indigenous Japanese Tsunami Evacuation Strategy) Applicable in Other Countries?" "Tsunami Risk Perception and Tsunami Evacuation Strategies in Pagadian, Philippines", "Youth Participation in the Recovery of Marawi, Philippines After the 2017 Armed Siege", "Strengthening Disaster and Climate Resilience of Small and Medium Enterprises in Asia", "Youth Council Participation in Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction in Infanta and Makati, Philippines", "Youth Participation in Disaster Risk Reduction through Science Clubs in the Philippines", "Climate Change Education in the Philippines", "Climate and Disaster Resilience Initiative: Capacity-Building Program", and "Climate and Disaster Resilience Initiative: Metro Manila".

As the titles suggest, he did not only look into the effects of the disaster itself but considered ways for future calamities that could be made less destructive since they could not be prevented from happening.

He studied how mangroves, as important breeding grounds for marine life, could shield coastal areas from the full force of a tsunami and how the youth could actively participate

in disaster risk reduction. With climate change, including global warming, melting polar ice caps, and rising sea levels, becoming increasingly inescapable, he researched on climate change education, capacity building to raise climate change and disaster resilience, and how to help strengthen the disaster and climate change resilience of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which account for more than 90 percent of business activities in the country.

Another research looked into how the youth could actively participate in the rehabilitation of Marawi, once one of the country's most beautiful cities but which still lies in ruins following fierce armed fighting in 2017 between government forces and rebel groups.

His various research and capacity-building projects were presented at several international academic conferences, training activities, and workshops. They were published in scientific journals. Recommendations emerging from his research were discussed in policy deliberations and included in disaster preparedness plans and, most importantly, local disaster risk management actions.

Glenn is the founding President of U-INSPIRE Philippines and is now one of its mentors. U-INSPIRE is the new Asian platform for youth participation and leadership in disaster risk reduction (DRR). It was established in 2019 in Jakarta, Indonesia with the help of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and now has 12 active chapters in the region.

He is also a leading champion of evidence-based youth participation in DRR in the Philippines and the whole of Asia.

In the last 10 years, he has been actively contributing to the scholarship on youth participation in DRR and has published a book, three journal articles, nine book chapters, a handbook on disaster education, a master's thesis, and a doctoral dissertation.

Since 2018, Glenn has been an Associate Professor at the Institute for Disaster Management and Reconstruction (IDMR), Sichuan University – Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He developed IDMR's research program on the roles of youth organizations in disaster resilience, as well as institutional research and educational collaborations in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries.

He is the focal person for IDMR research on business continuity management (BCM), disaster waste management, and science diplomacy. He also teaches undergraduate and graduate courses related to disaster management and reconstruction.

Glenn is a Young Scientist of the Integrated Research on Disaster Risk Program (IRDR), which is co-sponsored by the International Science Council (ISC) and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR).

In 2018, he became a Japan Foundation Asia Center (JFAC) Fellow. He was invited in 2019 to be one of the Section Editors of the Progress in Disaster Science Journal published by Elsevier.

Glenn previously worked as a researcher at the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) in Bangkok, Thailand; the Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies (GSGES) in Kyoto University in Japan; Tokyo Development Learning Center (TDLC), World Bank Tokyo Office; and Section of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), UNESCO Head Office in Paris, France.

Since 2009, he has been the principal investigator, coordinator, or researcher in numerous international research and capacity development projects (most of which involve the Philippines) related to disaster risk reduction. He uses funds from international donors in his DRR research and capacity development projects in the Philippines.

In conferring the Presidential Pamana ng Pilipino Award to Dr. Glenn F. Fernandez, the President recognizes his outstanding contributions to disaster risk management and for being the leading champion of evidence-based youth participation in disaster risk reduction in the Philippines and Asia.

## THE PHILIPPINE INQUIRER

### **Makati to install solar panels in city public schools, gov't offices**

By: Beatrice Pinlac

MANILA, Philippines – Public schools and local government offices in Makati City will soon be powered by solar panels, said Mayor Abby Binay.

This development came days after Binay declared a climate emergency in the city, citing the alarming rise in sea levels and global temperatures as sufficient grounds for this action.

"I am proud to announce that the city is procuring solar panels to provide a source of renewable energy in our schools and local government offices. This is part of our city-wide initiatives to reduce our carbon footprint and leave a greener and healthier environment for the next generation of Makatizens," she said during the kick-off activity of Brigada Eskwela at the Comembo Elementary School on Wednesday.

Binay also pointed out that the shift to solar energy is a "long-term commitment" to help reduce power consumption and costs, while also fulfilling the city's goal of lowering greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainability.

According to her, the installation of solar panels will be done in batches with Comembo Elementary School eyed as its pilot sites.

## THE PHILIPPINE STAR

### Hunger games

By Boo Chanco

This is a gut issue, literally, and our leaders are playing hunger games with it. This problem is threatening to escalate. Climate change, international politics, and our domestic failure in agriculture are not making things easier.

The national Social Weather Survey of April 19 to 27 found that 12.2 percent of Filipino families or an estimated 3.1 million experienced involuntary hunger – being hungry and not having anything to eat – at least once in the past three months.

Late last week, the latest economic growth or GDP growth rate report from the Philippine Statistics Authority showed that the agriculture sector contributed minimally to GDP.

Agriculture, forestry, and fishing (AFF) increased by 0.2 percent in the second quarter of this year. Sugarcane, including muscovado sugar-making, significantly declined to -50.1 percent.

President Junior should by now realize the gravity of it all. When asked by CNN Philippines if there is already a food crisis in the Philippines, NEDA Secretary Arsi Balisacan said yes.

Sec. Arsi then cited the soaring prices of rice and meat products, as well as the “low profitability” of farming.

“Food crisis has risen already, and as you know, the avian flu – this problem has been with us that has led to gripping price increases of meat. Rice prices have also been a problem. While the tariffication has brought down the cap of prices quite a bit, they are still high.

“There are issues that concern farmers, the low profitability of rice farming in agriculture and farming in general have to be faced, so with that I would say that our agriculture is in crisis,” he said in an interview with CNN Philippines.

Subsequently, a meme was published on Facebook by the Department of Agriculture featuring Balisacan saying: “To boost local food production, the government will continue to support the agriculture sector through lower input costs development of new farming technologies, extension of financial assistance to farmers, and strengthening the agricultural value chain. These can be achieved through the Plant, Plant, Plant Program 2, the government’s P24-billion flagship program on food security, which provides subsidies and support to the agriculture sector.”

Good intentions, but it sounds like we have heard those before. Can the DA implement? The past regime also planned to do those things and where are we now?

The reality of hunger was a subject of discussion in one of my Viber groups where a former agriculture official gave us a candid assessment of our situation.

"It will be worse by the end of this year as farmers were not able to apply the right amount of fertilizer because of soaring fertilizer prices. Also, government was unable to provide adequate fertilizer subsidies in time for this wet planting season from late May until harvest starting the second week of September.

"Urea is needed for the grain to fully develop within the palay husk. We will be short by 600,000 to 700,000 metric tons this year, discounting damages caused by typhoons. On the positive side, the private sector had already imported 1.8 million metric tons (MMT) as of the end of June. That is why rice prices are relatively stable."

Are we living off our past harvest? The former DA official corrected that impression:

"Technically we are not living off our past harvest. Local production can only meet 86 to 92 percent of our rice requirements, depending on how destructive typhoons visiting the country have been. That is the reason why we have an annual rice deficit of one MMT to 1.8 MMT, which we import mainly from Vietnam (almost 90 percent).

"We over imported last year, around three million MT and this explains why rice prices are stable. Same was true in 2020. No funds from government were used because it was the private sector that imported. This is one of the benefits of the Rice Tarification Law."

But importing from Vietnam may pose some problems now.

Vietnam is struggling with an extreme dry season in the Mekong delta. Other than La Nina, China has been putting up dams in upstream Mekong from China to Cambodia and reducing the water that goes to Vietnam.

The news isn't too encouraging from India, the largest rice producer. Bloomberg reports that a shortage of rain in parts of India has caused planting areas to shrink to the smallest in about three years.

India accounts for 40 percent of global rice trade. India's government has already curtailed wheat and sugar exports to safeguard food security and control local prices. The jump in India's rice prices reflect concern about output, Bloomberg reports, and curtailing rice exports could be next.

We also have problems with other crops. The retail price of white onions has hit P400 a kilo. It is also no longer available in different wet markets in Metro Manila.

On the other hand, the retail price of red onions ranges from P110 to P150 per kilo in various NCR markets. The DA is looking at importing both red and white onions to address the supply shortage.

As for sugar, a decision was made in March to import at least 200,000 tons of refined sugar, but a TRO was issued by Negros courts. Now, Junior's officials want to import around 300,000 MT, but Junior is against it. I am told we will run out of raw sugar this month and refined sugar by October/November.

Also listed for importation to stabilize retail market prices are pork, corn, poultry (after more than a million chickens were culled in Pampanga due to the spread of bird flu).

Can we cut down on rice consumption? It is a function of income one expert explained.

When income rises, consumption shifts from starch to protein rich food. Rice is still the cheapest energy source, as protein rich food like beef, pork, poultry, and fish are almost beyond the reach of poor Filipino consumers.

"We pay double the price of pork and around 73 percent more for chicken compared to Thai and Vietnamese consumers. Our rice price is at least 50 percent more expensive than Vietnam. Sugar price is more than double the international price."

If food prices continue their upward trend, hunger will be a reality for many of our people. And our politicians are playing hunger games with agriculture policies dictated by vested interests.

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